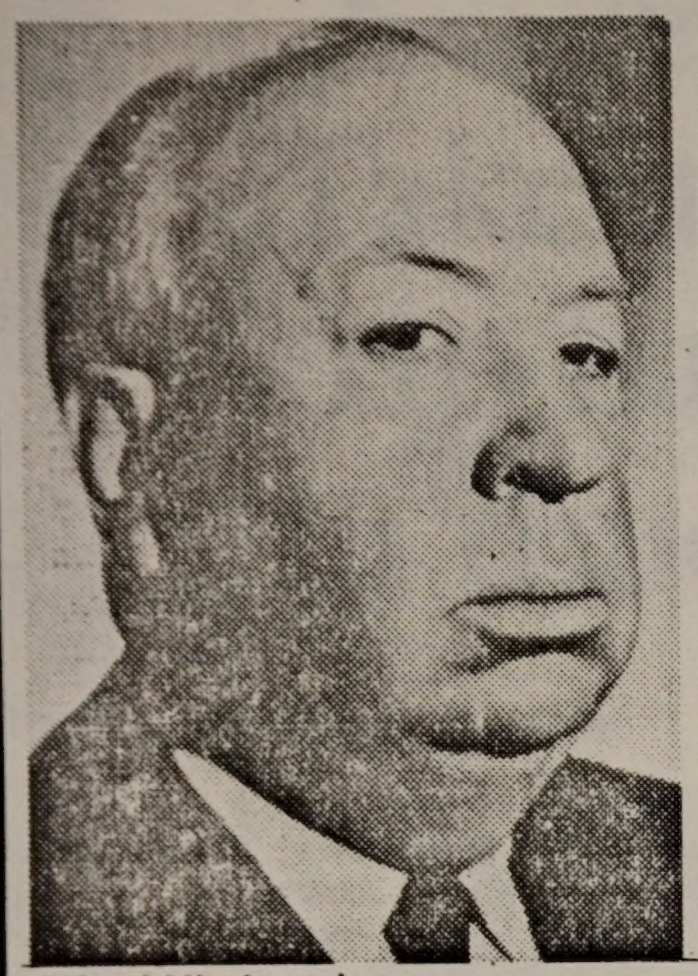
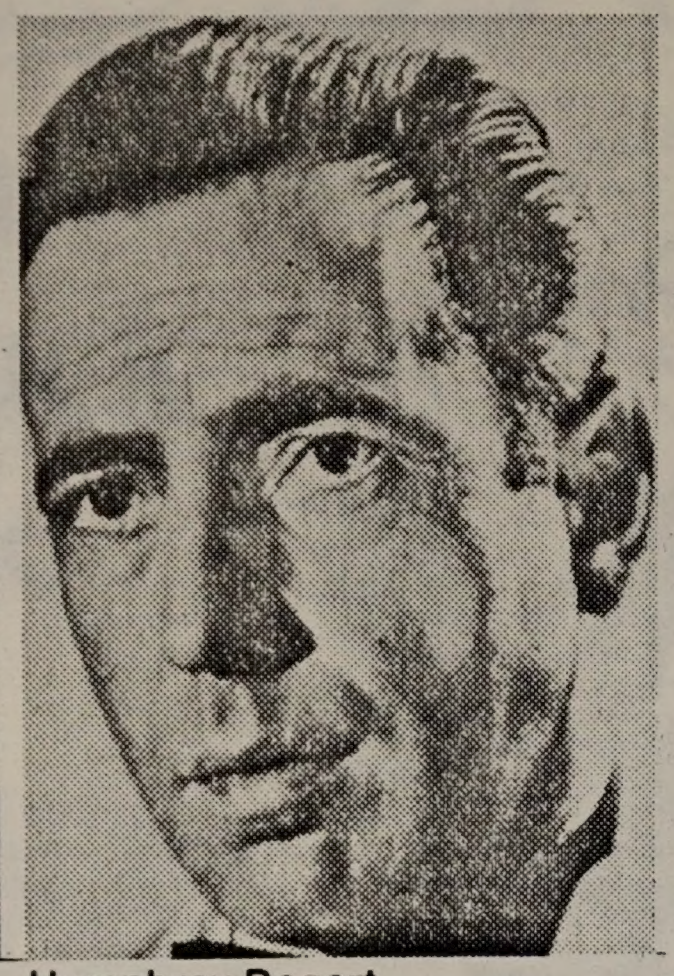
Los Angeles in the '40s



Alfred Hitchcock
.. within the "two-mile radius."



Humphrey Bogart
..."I'm no communist."

Where creative genius was lured 'by the gold'

By Carlos Vidal Greth
Special to the Times Tribune

SAN FRANCISCO — Maybe it wasn't Camelot, but there was something magical about Los Angeles in the 1940s, when the creative geniuses were thick as thieves: Fitzgerald, Hitchcock, Stravinsky, Faulkner, Garbo, Man Ray ... ad infinitum.

"Within a two-mile radius you could find two-thirds of the great talent in the world," screenwriter Ben Hecht wrote. "Poets and painters and philosophers. Lured here by the gold."

A three-day symposium, "Los Angeles in the '40s: The Pot of Gold," over the weekend in the Asian Art Museum offered a heady grab bag of topics, speakers and performances that accurately reflected the raging eclecticism of the period.

Presented by Humanities West and the Smithsonian Institution, the program included choreographer Bella Lewitzky, the Kronos Quartet performing the works of Los Angeles composers, Drama Studio London presenting a scene from Bertolt Brecht's "Life of Galileo" and lectures on film, music, literature and architecture.

British emigre and University of California at Santa Cruz professor Reyner Banham and architectural historian Esther McCoy spoke Saturday morning before a crowd of 75.

The irreverent Banham — a master of the acerb aside — came not to praise Los Angeles but to bury it. "Everybody in Europe at the time was convinced that the architectural movement on the West Coast was based in San Francisco. L.A. was nowhere.

"Many people said the fact that most of the houses were hidden by shrubbery was one of the great virtues of Southern Californian architecture," Banham said. "The residences generally presented a solid, windowless wall toward the public side to keep out the noise, dirt and surfers."

Banham and McCoy showed slides and blueprints

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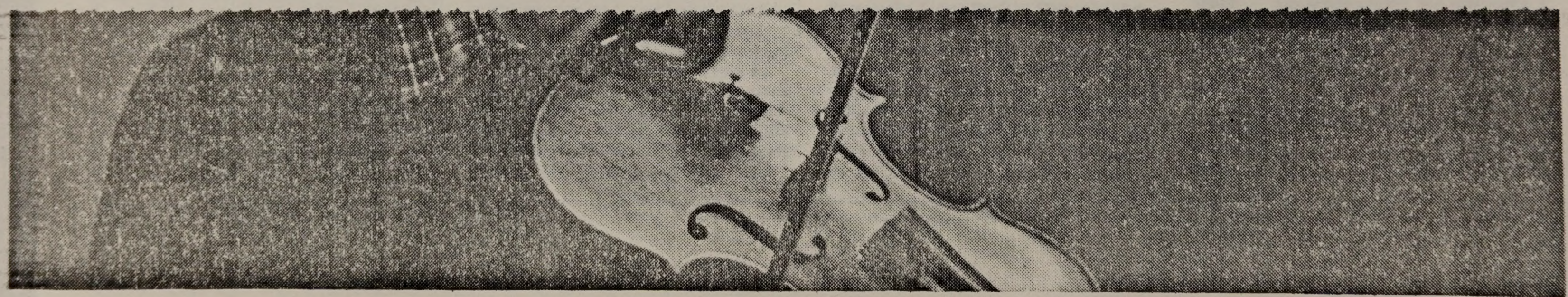

LOS ANGELES

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detailing the most radical of the edifices constructed in the 1940s, with plenty of exposed concrete, steel and glass. The pre-fab look was something like a modern, middle-class Mexican neighborhood without the rampant pastels.

"Looking at the interiors photographed at the time," the woolly bearded, comfortably rumpled Banham said, "you can't but wonder whether any of the owners were breeders. The floors were all spotless, there was a carefully poised pineapple on the coffee table and the same blond woman in the background."

Robert Rosen, director of the National Center for Film/Video Preservation, part of the American Film Institute, delivered a lecture he called "Subversion in the Dream Factory: The Hollywood Film." Unfortunately, he larded his speech with phrases like "macro-social issues" and "Anglo-American confluence," which played like the cant of an "annal retentive" ("Annals of the American Sociology Society," that sort of thing).

The goateed Rosen, nevertheless, won his audience through his passionate involvement in his subject and the use of classic film clips to demonstrate his points.

He said that from 1939 to 1941, Hollywood began producing films calling for American involvement in the war. "At the same time," he said, "films like 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington' and 'The Grapes of Wrath' showed a preoccupation with social issues and harsh urban realities."

Rosen described the Machiavellian manipulation of the film industry by the Office of War Information and Film Bureau, which effectively got the studios to regulate themselves. The Bureau's involvement extended to mild censorship.

By 1943, 12 percent of all movie professionals were toiling in the military, and 6,000 actors were touring in USO shows worldwide. Propagandist films had dropped in popularity, especially among soldiers on the front. "People had their fill of the accumulated horrors of war," Rosen said.

The political left in Hollywood enjoyed a brief ascendancy after the war, before a more insidious form of government control occurred. Rosen said that William Wyler's "The Best Years of Our Lives" (1946) — a disturbing film presaging the Cold War and dealing with veterans adjusting to civilian life — couldn't have been made one year later because it would have been "too subversive."

One year Humphrey Bogart led a plane full of stars to Washington, D.C., to protest government meddling in the film industry. "The very next year," Rosen said, "he wrote an article in 'Photoplay' magazine saying, 'I'm no communist. I was a dope to front for them.'

"It symbolized the tragedy of the McCarthyism that was to come."

Herald Examiner, Weekend, March 21, 1985

EVENTS

Take a trip back in time

By Josette Serlin

Think: Fred Astaire, Arnold Schoenberg, Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley, Orson Welles, Lauren Bacall and Edward Weston. Though the list might drum up isolated images of black-and-white war flicks, "In the Mood" music, the "Rosie the Riveter" syndrome, women joining the work force, Raymond Chandler novels and a general sentiment of Hollywood nostalgia, it doesn't necessarily bring to mind a whole picture of Los Angeles in the '40s, the creative epicenter from whence it sprang.

But L.A. in the 1940s was a hotbed of economic, social and cultural expansion. The decade that spanned World War II, postwar industry booms and pre-TV moviemaking, Hollywood's "golden years," was pivitol in L.A.'s

development. Millions flocked to Southern California to take part in its economic promise and artistically free environment. Once here, they created a haven for the arts and a unique cultural heritage. Yet, for a period so rich in expression and growth, it has received surprisingly little attention. For many baby boomers, the era has come to life only from such revival epics as Woody Allen's "Broadway Danny Rose." But such a rich period of Los Angeles history merits more exploration, and a three-day symposium this weekend does just that. It's titled "Los Angeles in the '40s — The Pot of Gold."

Humanities West, a San Francisco-based organization dedicated to exploring cultural heritage, in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art and USC's College of Continuing Education, has created the retrospective to spotlight the cultural flowering that took place in Los Angeles in the 1940s. The event will feature a series of lectures, discussions, performance art and original archival films to expound upon visual and performance art, including film, dance, writing, architecture, theater and music.

The program begins at 8:30 tonight with a lecture by Professor Michael Meyer on Los Angeles culture, imported and indigenous. Following this will be a lecture and performance by Bella Lewitzky and Iris Pell, titled "A Personal Glance Back at Dance in the '40s."

Tomorrow's program begins at 9:30 a.m. with a discussion of "The Making of the Scene: Architecture and Urbanization" led by architectural historian and writer Esther McCoy and Professor Reyner Banham. From 12:30 to 1:45 p.m. Leonard Stein, Arnold Schoenberg and Michael Steinberg of the San Francisco Symphony will discuss "Emigre and Native Composers" and later tomorrow night the Kronos Quartet will perform works by Los Angeles composers. Tomorrow afternoon also features Robert Rosen on "Subversion in the Dream Factory: The Hollywood Film" (referring to all the blacklisting that took place in Hollywood in the '40s). And a panel discussion will explore the theme "High Art, Low Art."

On Sunday, Herald book editor Digby Diehl will talk about writers of the '40s. Art historian Susan Ehrlich will then lecture on the artist as prophet in the wilderness. The weekend's final panel discussion will address '40s themes.

The symposium also will be presented in full next weekend at the Asian Art Museum's Trustees' Auditorium in San Francisco.

What	Los Angeles in the '40s conference
Where	Davidson Conference Center, USC
When	8-10:30 p.m. today, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and 8 p.m. tomorrow, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Sun
How much	Full registration (all events and concert) $75; today only, $20; day events tomorrow $60; tomorrow evening's concert $12; Sun $30
Info	743-4560 or 743-4343